

## *Introduction*

### *Prologue*

At 9 am on Wednesday, September 19, 1694, a butcher named Barnes from Stony Stratford, Buckinghamshire, walked three miles to Calverton House in the neighboring village. Locals gossiped that its widowed owner, Grace Bennet, kept large quantities of gold in the manor house. Finding her alone in the servants' hall Barnes broke her neck so viciously that "her face turned behind her."<sup>1</sup> She may have been the only mother of a peeress to be murdered in the seventeenth century.

This audacious robbery and murder immediately raises many questions. Who was Grace Bennet? What was the larger context for her murder? Why did Thomas, Earl of Ailesbury, call Grace "the most sordid person that ever lived?"<sup>2</sup>

When I read the report of Grace Bennet's murder, I already knew something about her. She appeared in my previous book, *Consuming Splendor: Society and Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*.<sup>3</sup> *Consuming Splendor* examined the ways in which the consumption of luxury goods transformed social practices, gender roles, royal policies, and the economy in seventeenth-century England. Specifically, that book looked at new ways to shop; the Crown's sponsorship of luxury trades and manufactures; new aspirations in building, furnishing, and collecting; the reinvention of identity through new artifacts; and the transformation of meaning as objects moved across cultures and into new contexts.

Grace Bennet was a luxury consumer. Her desires included new cravings for West Indian groceries and the accessories to go with them. In 1662 she

<sup>1</sup> Anon., *The Unfortunate Lady: A Brief Narrative of the Life, and Unhappy Death of the Lady Bennet, Late of Buckinghamshire; Who Was Most Barbarously and Inhumanly Murdred at Her Own House, on Wednesday the 19th of September, 1694, by a Butcher of Stony-Stratford . . .* (London: Printed for H. Maston in Warwick-Lane, 1694).

<sup>2</sup> *Memoirs of Thomas, Earl of Ailesbury*, ed. W. E. Buckley, 2 vols., Roxburghe Club Publications (Westminster [London]: Nichols and Sons, 1890), Vol. II, p. 481.

<sup>3</sup> *Consuming Splendor: Society and Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).



**Figure 0.1** Sugar box, 1673–1674, width 8 in. (20.3 cm.), Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1968 (68.141.161). © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Art Resource, NY, British, London. Grace Bennet’s silver sugar box may have resembled this one made ten years later.

wrote to her husband in London: “I want a thing; such a one as your mother had to put sugar in: they are to be bought at the goldsmiths; they are made of silver and they used to call them sugar chests. If you buy one let it be of the biggest size as usually made.”<sup>4</sup> Grace Bennet’s 1662 order for the largest silver sugar chest available in London and her subsequent murder began my investigations. *Women of Fortune* has become a study of social, economic, and cultural change in early modern England through an analysis of the Bennet and Morewood families and their network of connections across city, country, and continents. The book examines the creation of the family fortune from international trade and Crown finance to private banking and shares; the marriage of the families into the country gentry and nobility through a strategy of providing large marriage portions; and the powerful women who added to, invested in, and spent the family fortune while establishing their own independence.

## I

*Women of Fortune* tells the story of three generations of merchant, gentry, and noble families, intertwined by marriage, whose climb to wealth and

<sup>4</sup> Hatfield House Archives, General 72/35, Grace Bennet to Simon Bennet, May 5, 1662.

position played out against the background of a century of economic growth, civil and international war, and domestic upheaval. In particular, the book looks at the women in these families, young heiresses who became baronets, peers, and bankrupts' wives, and City and noble widows who promoted their own property rights and cultural and intellectual interests in the years between 1570 and 1732.

These three generations of the Bennet and Morewood families, and their extended kin – the Finches, Gresleys, Riches, Cliftons, and Cecils – include Yorkshire and Berkshire parish gentry, London merchants, Lord Mayors, lawyers, a Speaker of the House of Commons, a Lord Chancellor, a leading doctor, a well-known philosopher, court officials, and the nobility. Their life trajectories demonstrate the importance of parish gentry aspirations, merchant wealth, and aristocratic need, of upward mobility attained through international trade, the law, court office, and marriage, and downward mobility through overly enthusiastic attempts at agricultural improvement and over-extension of debt. They include Royalists, Parliamentarians, Tories, Whigs, and Jacobites, members of the Church of England, Presbyterians, nonjurors, Roman Catholics, and a Quaker.

The individual stories of the Bennets and Morewoods shed important light on the connections between land, commerce, and finance, changing attitudes toward money as a symbol and as a commodity, including the value of gold and the size of marriage portions, and the benefits of investments in trade, mortgages, and shares. As new forms of investments such as real estate speculation and shares appeared, older forms such as saving gold were deprecated. The Bennets and their kin also illustrate the continuing interest in placing gentlemen as London apprentices in the late seventeenth century and contemporary attitudes toward overseas trade.

Heiresses have often been seen simply as the transmitters of property, footnotes in the larger story of the rise and fall of aristocratic and noble families. Their own lives, before and after marriage, have generally been left unexplored.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, *Women of Fortune* looks at several heiresses to merchant and aristocratic fortunes and examines how they managed their property and promoted their children's advancement. In particular, it analyses the individual identities they created for themselves and the new lives they devised on the continent and in London. Some Bennet women had to

<sup>5</sup> See Sir John Habakkuk, *Marriage, Debt, and the Estates System: English Landownership, 1650–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Lawrence Stone, *Family and Fortune: Studies in Aristocratic Finance in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). For work on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century heiresses, see, for instance, Rosemary O'Day, *Cassandra Brydges (1670–1735), First Duchess of Chandos: Life and Letters* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2007).

accept arranged marriages when they were young teenagers, while others faced legal claims from their husbands and sons who wished to control their estates. Yet as other historians have found, patriarchal practices were increasingly challenged in practice in everyday life and in the courts in the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> *Women of Fortune* suggests that elite women's positions improved in the late seventeenth century, including their freedom to travel abroad, to study, to write, and to manage their own money.<sup>7</sup> Over three generations, the Bennet and Morewood women were strong, curious, and independent. They took major roles in their families and as widows carved out fresh starts for themselves.

Despite suggestions that England had a closed elite, the experiences of the Bennets and Morewoods, suggest that England's landed elite in the seventeenth century was open to those whose wealth came from trade and banking if the connections were good enough or the marriage portion large enough.<sup>8</sup> Three Bennet heiresses, in two different generations, married into the upper nobility while two others married into the baronetcy.

## II

*Women of Fortune* begins its story with two younger sons of parish gentry, Thomas Bennet and Gilbert Morewood, who came to London from Berkshire and Yorkshire as gentlemen apprentices to London livery companies. Thomas Bennet and his brother Richard both became members of the Mercers' Company in the middle of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Gilbert Morewood was, remarkably, one of ten Morewoods apprenticed to the Grocers' Company in the seventeenth century. Thomas Bennet and Gilbert Morewood made their fortunes in a variety of different enterprises. Although Thomas, as a mercer, began his career trading in luxury textiles in the 1570s and 1580s, he later diversified his capital into Jacobean Crown finance, money lending, and real estate. He became an alderman and Lord Mayor of London and was knighted by James I in 1604. Morewood, the grocer,

<sup>6</sup> Tim Stretton and Krista J. Kesselring, eds., *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World* (Ithaca, NY: McGill University, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> On seventeenth-century women writers, see Hilda Smith, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> On the issue of whether or not Britain had an open elite, see Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), and more recently Nuala Zahedieh, "An Open Elite? Colonial Commerce, the Country House and the Case of Sir Gilbert Heathcote and Normanton Hall," in *Slavery and the British Country House*, ed. Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013), pp. 71–77, 150–152; Kimberly Schutte, *Women, Rank, and Marriage in the British Aristocracy, 1485–2000: An Open Elite?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

made his fortune in the East India Company, importing spices and exporting lead, but he also invested in the Virginia Company and other ventures to the New World, as well as in marine insurance, real estate, and money lending. A strong Presbyterian Morewood became one of the leaders of the East India Company in the 1640s.

The importance of credit and risk in the English economy, already growing in the late sixteenth century,<sup>9</sup> continued especially during the English Civil War and the Republic. As a result, new types of banks emerged from the 1640s on. Thomas Bennet's grandson, Simon Bennet, who inherited family wealth from his merchant father, philanthropist uncle, and aunt in the midst of the English Civil War, chose not to invest in international trade but instead invested the family's property holdings in a new venture, the mortgage and loan business. Even as Robert Abbott and later Robert Clayton were establishing their early bank in the late 1640s,<sup>10</sup> Simon Bennet went into private banking. Simon Bennet, however, did not take deposits; he was self-financing. Simon made short-term loans backed either by promissory notes or by mortgages on real estate to a clientele that included both the landed and the city's shopkeepers. Because mortgage law was still developing, borrowers tended to avoid mortgages if they could. Only 2.5 percent of land in England was mortgaged in the 1660s, but by the 1690s the figure was 20 percent.<sup>11</sup> While his business was not as large as Clayton's, his contemporaries called him "Great Bennet." In his twenties he was already one of the richest men in Buckinghamshire and sheriff of the county.

In contrast, his cousin, John Bennet, another grandson of Sir Thomas Bennet, sought to improve the agricultural production of his lands in Cambridgeshire through enclosure, new technology, and further land purchases. He financed his plans through short-term mortgages backed by his land. When he failed to repay on time, he faced foreclosure and prison despite the doctrine of the equity of redemption, which supposedly protected mortgagees.<sup>12</sup> Thus, one cousin, Simon, in finance, increased his fortune through short-term loans, mortgages, and moneylending while the other, in

<sup>9</sup> Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Frank T. Melton, *Sir Robert Clayton and the Origins of Deposit Banking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Christiaan van Bochove, Heidi Deneweth, and Jaco Zijderdijjn, "Real Estate and Mortgage Finance in England and the Low Countries, 1300–1800," *Continuity and Change*, 30, 1 (2015), 9–38.

<sup>12</sup> The doctrine of the "equity of redemption" allowed redemption of property even if a payment was missed if the mortgage was repaid within a reasonable amount of time. Heneage Finch, 1st Earl of Nottingham and Lord Chancellor, enunciated it in *Newcomb v. Bonham* in 1681.

agriculture, lost it using the same instruments. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Simon Bennet's daughter Grace adopted a new form of investment, placing most of her money in stocks in the Bank of England and the East India and South Sea Companies.

Thus the Bennets and Morewoods illustrate the increasing diversity of investments available in the seventeenth century. In the heated economy of the late seventeenth century, wealth, in the form of gold coins, marriage portions, land, rental property, bonds, loans, mortgages and bills of exchange became increasingly important to the well to do regardless of rank or gender. In 1690 Nicholas Barbon attacked those who simply kept their wealth in gold and refused to invest it or spend it.<sup>13</sup>

Over more than a century the Bennet and Morewood fortune grew and their social position increased through the use of large marriage portions, drawn from new sources in international trade with the East and West Indies, North and South America, Crown finance, and banking. That fortune did not come, however, from owning plantations in the West Indies. Furthermore, unlike many rich men, Simon Bennet did not build a new country house. He lived in Calverton Manor, which his grandfather, Sir Thomas, the Lord Mayor, bought for his son and which Simon had inherited. In 1659 Simon put on an extension.<sup>14</sup> By 1732, the Bennets had not gained a title for themselves but their successful marital strategies meant, that with the death of the last heiress, most of their wealth was left to the Earls of Salisbury and went to support Hatfield House.

Economic diversification and social change provided a new context for gender roles in the seventeenth century.<sup>15</sup> Under the traditional common law doctrine of coverture, once married, women's property came under their husband's control during their lifetime. In the seventeenth century, however, legal arrangements made at the time of their marriage could overcome the doctrine of coverture. For instance, fathers created trusts leaving money separately to their daughters and provided timber rights on land that they would inherit. Husbands arranged for their wives to have "pin money," a separate settlement at the time of marriage. Under the "doctrine of necessaries," women could contract for goods if they were appropriate to the status of their husbands. Widows could make prenuptial agreements with their new husbands. Often husbands left elite women their jewelry, household furnishings, coaches and horses. Women also made wills leaving their estate to their

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Barbon, *A Discourse of Trade* (London: Tho. Milbourn for the author, 1690).

<sup>14</sup> Calverton Manor was featured on *Restoration Home* on BBC2, August 2011.

<sup>15</sup> See Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender and History*, 20 (November 2008), 558–583.

daughters and provided that their sons-in-law were to have no right to control their money.<sup>16</sup>

Women continually asserted their property rights across the century and Bennet women repeatedly used the law to press their property rights from the 1620s to the 1730s. *Women of Fortune* illustrates how women managed their own wealth, often controlled the family economy, and brought lawsuits to protect their property against all contenders, including their husbands and sons. Thus Lady Elizabeth Finch, a wealthy City widow, made a prenuptial agreement to protect both her own and her son Simon's large inheritance. She left money to her married daughters and explicitly tried to prevent her sons-in-law from having any control over it. While married, Lady Frances Gresley asserted her timber rights and pressed to have her younger sons placed as gentlemen apprentices. Grace Bennet the younger demanded from her husband the rents left to her by her father by means of a trust. As a widow, Lady Frances Clifton used an Act of Parliament to provide marriage portions for her daughters. She also sued William Sacheverell for mishandling her affairs even though her brother, Heneage Finch, Earl of Nottingham, Solicitor General, had recommended him. While wealthy widows in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries usually remarried, none of the Bennet women, who married in 1650 or later and were predeceased by their first husbands, did so. In this they mirrored a general trend: London women in general did not remarry at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>17</sup>

*Women of Fortune* also displays the identities these women created for themselves as cosmopolitan scholars, travelers, London consumers, and investors, going beyond their roles as daughters, wives, widows, and mothers. Their identities were reflected in their choice of geographical location, manners, and cultural interests. The mid and late seventeenth century increasingly offered women opportunities for social and geographical mobility and for female agency that caused anxiety about old and new forms of material culture and behavior. Anne Finch, Viscountess Conway, became a philosopher who wrote a critique of the work of ancient and contemporary philosophers such as Hobbes and Spinoza and maintained an international network of correspondents. Her niece, Frances, Countess of Salisbury, left her small son behind and spent four years in Europe from 1699 to 1703 where she immersed herself in the culture of Italy, France, and the Low Countries.

<sup>16</sup> See Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Boulton, "London Widowhood Revisited: The Decline of Female Remarriage in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," *Continuity and Change*, 5, 3 (1990), 323–355.



London was central to the social life of almost all of the elite women in *Women of Fortune*. While the family began as parish gentry in Berkshire and Yorkshire and some of the Bennets, Morewoods, and their connections had country houses built in the sixteenth and early or middle seventeenth centuries, the capital increasingly became a center for elite life which included shopping, marriage making, visiting, attending parliament and the law courts, and entertaining for longer and longer periods of each year. Almost all of the Bennet women lived in, visited, and maintained ties with friends or relations in London. After living with her merchant husband Richard Bennet in the City of London, Elizabeth, Lady Finch, lived in Kensington House, which later became Kensington Palace, for thirty years. Her daughter Frances, Lady Clifton, once widowed, spent only six months a year in Nottinghamshire, the other six in Bloomsbury. Lady Finch's younger daughter, the philosopher Viscountess Conway, often stayed with her mother at Kensington House. Frances dowager Countess of Salisbury, once back from Europe, lived mainly in London, as did her sister, Grace Bennet, one street away in Mayfair. Even Lady Gresley, who spent much of her time in Drakelow in Derbyshire, had a decades-long correspondence with her old friend Sir John Moore, the former Lord Mayor of London.

### III

Yet despite these examples of women who asserted their power over their property and created their own metropolitan identities, arranged marriages continued in the Restoration even when ideas of companionate marriage had long been in circulation. Thus, *Women of Fortune* looks closely at the arranged marriages of the three Bennet heiresses, daughters of Grace and Simon Bennet. Grace Bennet was the daughter of a well-to-do East India Company merchant, Gilbert Morewood, and she had married Simon Bennet, the rich real estate investor and private banker. They had had seven children together, but only three girls survived to adulthood. Simon and Grace sought to make upwardly mobile marriages for their three daughters: Elizabeth Bennet married Edward, Viscount Latimer, son of Thomas Osborne, Earl of Danby, Lord Treasurer of England; Frances Bennet married James, 4th Earl of Salisbury; and Grace Bennet married her cousin John Bennet, a Member of Parliament.

While heiresses were always sought after, in the 1680s, James Butler, 1st Duke of Ormond, made clear that the monetary value of brides was related to their status: those with what he called a "defect of quality" had to offer larger portions. Presumably the young Frances Bennet, whom he was considering for his grandson, had such a defect of quality because her father was



a wealthy banker or moneylender without title, even though their cousin Henry Bennet, Earl of Arlington, who was acting as broker, was Charles II's Lord Chamberlain. Ormond rejected everything about the Bennets – except their money. In the end, the Bennets rejected Ormond.

*Women of Fortune* tells the story of the Bennet heiresses and their husbands before and after these marriages à la mode. Thus, Elizabeth Bennet, who had married Viscount Latimer in 1674, died after the birth of her second child. Because neither child survived, Latimer had to return her £10,000 portion to Simon Bennet. He was never rich enough to marry well again. Frances Bennet, at the age of thirteen with her £20,000 portion, married James Cecil, 4th Earl of Salisbury, in 1684, rather than the Duke of Ormond's grandson. Salisbury converted to Roman Catholicism in 1687, became a member of James II's Bedchamber in 1688, and was imprisoned in the Tower for Jacobitism after the Glorious Revolution. Grace the younger eloped with her cousin, John Bennet, a Cambridgeshire country gentleman. John Bennet used his in-laws' wealth to attempt to improve his agricultural holdings, failed, and went to debtors' prison in 1698, dying there in 1712. Earlier, in 1694, the girls' mother, Grace Bennet, personally difficult and disliked locally for both enclosing land and failing to pay tithes and poor rates, was murdered by the local butcher searching for gold.

Facing these family losses, Grace Bennet's surviving daughters, one a widowed young countess, the other the wife of the bankrupt Bennet, created new lives for themselves in London and on the continent. Almost all studies of the Grand Tour and the Giro d'Italia in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries focus on young men and the role that the tour played in their education and their careers. Little has been written on women travelers before the mid or later eighteenth century. When Frances, Countess of Salisbury left for Paris and then Rome for Jubilee Year in 1699, she began a trip that was one of the longest undertaken by any aristocratic woman in the seventeenth century. Her account book documents her daily visits to see art, architecture, and antiquities, to hear music, visit churches, and view gardens and monuments. She was an indefatigable traveler. Making connections with Roman Catholics and Jacobites, she and her would-be lover, George Jocelyn, who wooed her for fifteen months, evoked gossip from Samuel Pepys and his circle among others. Nevertheless, the countess stayed in Europe after surviving smallpox and remained a step ahead of the clashing armies in the War of the Spanish Succession.

Grace Bennet the younger successfully sued her imprisoned husband for the income from her properties that he continued to collect. Surviving her husband's decade-long sojourn in the Fleet and then the King's Prison, she made a life for herself in Mayfair within a circle of well-to-do single women.

She successfully invested much of her fortune in shares, lent money to her friends, and maintained close ties to her nephew, the 5th Earl of Salisbury, and his family. The sole survivor of her family, she left much of the seventeenth-century merchant wealth made in the East India trade and banking to her great nephew, the 6th Earl of Salisbury, in 1732, reviving that family's fortunes.

#### IV

*Women of Fortune* analyzes the connections that linked individuals, families, and groups to their larger environment in city and country. Such connections were especially important in a society in which private relationships provided important access to social and economic resources, political advancement, and intellectual and cultural patronage. Constructed by extended kinship relationships, marital connections, financial and business dealings, as well as religious, political, and intellectual ties, these connections often overlapped. The significance of these connections were the variety of ways in which they enabled people to carry on their businesses, secure loans, gain political advantage, make marriages, and form intellectual and cultural circles.

Two of Sir Thomas Bennet's children married his business associates in the cloth trade and Crown finance, George Lowe and Sir Arthur Ingram. Bennet then worked closely with Ingram on Crown loans, and loans to the nobility. He also helped Ingram take as his third wife a woman whose father was indebted to Bennet. Kin acted as brokers in making marriages as in the case of Henry Bennet, Earl of Arlington, who tried to arrange noble marriages for two daughters of his cousin Simon Bennet. At the same time, Arlington's efforts aimed to reinforce his own political standing with the Lord Treasurer, Lord Danby, and James Butler, Duke of Ormond. Frances, Lady Gresley appealed to her father's former apprentice, a wealthy investor and former Lord Mayor, to place her younger sons as apprentices in the City. Anne, Viscountess Conway became a well-known philosopher, not only because she had tutors at home but also because she maintained a long correspondence with her brothers' Oxford tutor, Henry More.

Networks linked groups as well as individuals. Because the Morewoods of Yorkshire and Derbyshire sent ten of their sons to the Grocers' Company in the seventeenth century, they created a new network of London, Derbyshire, and Yorkshire merchants who became suppliers of lead to the East India Company. Grace Bennet's London social circle included women investors to whom she loaned money. John Bennet used his connections to his brother, his brother's patron, and his cousin who was an MP to gain a